

# Shift Work

**I**t is estimated that 20 million Americans — roughly 1 out of 5 — are shiftworkers. There are some professions where shiftwork is common place. For example, hospital employees, police officers, aircraft mechanics and many factory workers know shift work as a way of life. This pamphlet can help you deal with the difficulties of shift work—making it easier on you and your family and making you more productive. Working and sleeping at different times around the clock can have the same effect on your body as crossing several time zones. The shiftworker can experience the symptoms of ‘jet lag’. If you have daytime fatigue, nighttime insomnia or gastrointestinal disturbances -- you may be suffering from ‘shift lag’.

**T**here are many different kinds of shift schedules. They are known as “mids,” “swings” or “nights.” Among experienced shift workers it is tough to get agreement over which shift is “best.” However, there is some agreement that the easiest schedules to adapt to are those that have fewer night shifts. A schedule that contains all night shifts can be very difficult because of a daytime oriented world. Your family, friends, and most importantly, your body clock or body rhythms are most active during the day. This type of daytime rhythm is called circadian (circa=about; dian=day).

The key to managing shift work is maintaining your circadian rhythm in either a day or nighttime orientation.

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## Coping with Shift Work

Enlisting the aid of family is essential to a successful shiftworker. Help them understand the importance of getting your sleep at the right times of the day.

The opportunity for healthy meals during night shifts is limited. Make your shift meals as nutritious as possible—fruits, vegetables and breads. Have your large meal for lunch rather than dinner. Drink lots of water or juice while on duty.

Keep your work area well lighted—it will dramatically decrease your fatigue.

Exercise regularly. People who are fit adjust to shiftwork better than those in poor shape. If you regularly exercise during a day shift, fit that routine into your night shift. Experiment with these techniques--adapt them to see what works for you.

## Night Shift

Night shift workers need 6-7 days to reverse the normal daytime orientation. Get 7-8 restful hours of sleep in a darkened room and avoid early morning daylight, until about 7 a.m. Wear sunglasses if necessary. Once the nighttime routine is established, the shiftworker needs to maintain it...even on

days off. The principal survival technique is consistency of habits—if you eat breakfast, and exercise when you wake up, do so whenever your adjusted morning occurs.

If you only work the night shift occasionally, take a long nap (3-4 hours) before starting the shift. After the shift is over, sleep 3-4 hours--this will give you enough recovery sleep to get you through the day and put you back on your normal daytime schedule.

## Rotating Shift

A rotating shift schedule is difficult on your body clock. Just as you start to adjust to a night shift, you may start “swings”, then in a few days, the day shift. You shouldn’t try to change your circadian rhythm because the shift only lasts a few days.

If you work a rotating shift, you should try to maintain your daytime circadian rhythm. To do that, your sleep pattern for the night shift only, is very different from normal daytime workers. When you finish the nightshift, only sleep 4-5 hours. Get up, participate in your normal daytime activities and return to bed — get 3-4 more hours before your shift begins. When you rotate to swings or days, sleep as normal -- at night, at consistent times

## Sleep Smarter

Sleep is a basic human need, like eating but more compelling. To be at our best, most of us need 7-8 hours of uninterrupted sleep each night.

If you are accumulating a “sleep debt” and feel chronically tired, here are some recommendations to help you sleep better:

Sleep at consistent times. You will sleep better, if you go to bed and wake up at the same time, including weekends or days off.

Avoid alcohol, especially during the 2-3 hours before bed.

Avoid stimulants (coffee, chocolate, soft drinks, tea) during the 3-5 hours before bed. Find out if any drugs you take impair sleep (for example, some decongestants, aspirin, ibuprofens and anti-inflammatory drugs).

A warm bath, brushing your teeth or just washing your face and hands can make you more comfortable.

For dinner, eat foods that help promote sleep--complex carbohydrates (pastas, potatoes, breads) and foods rich in tryptophan (fowl, legumes). Avoid large meals within three hours of bedtime.

Don’t prop your head too high on the pillow.

Make your sleep environment comfortable--set the room temperature slightly higher and make the room as dark as possible.

Stay in shape.



## Relaxation Tips

Sometimes the key to restful sleep is relaxation. Here are some tips.

Lie comfortably on your back. Close your eyes and take slow deep breaths. Try to use your stomach muscles, not chest, to breathe in and out. Inhale slowly for about 4 seconds, hold your breath for 2 seconds and exhale for 4 seconds. Start with 4 or 5 of these relaxing breaths until you feel comfortable with this technique.

While deeply breathing, visualize a very pleasant but simple scene. Alternate these deep breaths while you tense and relax each muscle group. Squeeze each muscle group, simultaneously on the right and left sides of your body, as hard as you can for about 4 seconds. It works best to follow a pattern. For example: fists, then arms, shoulders and upper back, face, toes and feet, calves, thighs, buttocks, lower back and stomach. Finish with a few deep breaths.